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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000182

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DAKAR PASS RAO, ODC, AND DAO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/23/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [CASC](#) [ASEC](#) [GA](#)
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: MORE ON FAILED COUP ATTEMPT

REF: A. BANJUL 178
[1](#)B. BANJUL 177
[1](#)C. STATE 45407 (TD-314/20413-06)

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Amidst ongoing calm and atmosphere of general normality in the Gambian capital following the reportedly aborted coup plot March 21, GOTG source claims that the ringleader was spotted entering the Casamance region in Senegal. In March 22-23 meetings, our Emergency Action Committee (EAC) agreed that Embassy's current security posture remains appropriate. The GOTG is keen to portray itself as functioning normally, but President Jammeh himself is maintaining a low profile. According to a well-informed source, former National Intelligence Agency head and his deputy may soon be released from custody for lack of evidence of their involvement in coup plotting. However, we are also told that the Mayor of Banjul suburb has been picked up; if so, the number of current detainees would rise to ten. We continue to believe that there was indeed a plot to overthrow Jammeh, although the planning may not have been as advanced as claimed by the GOTG. In any event, we do not/not regard this incident as jeopardizing the country's stability -- or its political calendar, including hosting the June/July AU summit and holding presidential elections in October 2006.
END SUMMARY.

OVERVIEW

[1](#)2. (SBU) As the dust begins to settle over the reportedly aborted coup attempt the evening of March 21 (reftels), calm continues to reign in the Banjul area and, to our knowledge elsewhere in the country. The exception to the business-as-usual atmosphere is the reinforced military and police presence at the Denton Bridge security checkpoint on the highway between Banjul and the suburbs, where vehicles are being thoroughly searched. In their March 23 editions, local journals led with the coup plot story, featuring photos of the ringleader, former Chief of Defense Staff Lt Col Ndure Cham, reportedly still at large. As this was being written, GOTG source claimed to us that Cham had been spotted entering the Casamance region of Senegal and that the GOTG had requested GOS assistance in apprehending him. (NOTE: Rumors swirl about Cham's status; according to one, he has been secretly killed by authorities. END NOTE.)

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13. (SBU) In March 22-23 meetings, our Emergency Action Committee (EAC) agreed that the mission's overall security posture remained appropriate, that violence or disturbances stemming from a thwarted overthrow attempt could not be ruled out, and that continued careful monitoring of the situation was in order. Various private Amcits expressed appreciation to us for our warden message (refs a and b), but reported no incidents.

GOTG'S POSTURE

14. (SBU) The GOTG is clearly intent on portraying itself as functioning normally in the aftermath of an attempt against its leadership. March 22-23 witnessed previously scheduled GOTG events occurring as planned, e.g., funeral ceremony for deceased National Assembly Deputy attended by various ministers, and Information Minister's presiding over ceremony publicizing the issuance of UNICEF's World Children's Report 2006. Sources report nothing amiss at military barracks in the Banjul area, and we are told that the newly appointed Deputy Chief of Defense Staff, Lt Col Peter Singhateh, immediately returned to The Gambia from the UK, where he had been on a training mission, to assume his post here. (COMMENT: Indicative of the rumor mill's current intensity, some had claimed that Singhateh's new appointment was a ploy by President Jammeh to encourage the former's prompt return in order to have him arrested for suspected complicity in the plot. A knowledgeable source told us, however, that as of March 23 Singhateh was at the office and busy familiarizing himself with his new duties. END COMMENT.)

15. (C) However, Jammeh himself has maintained a low profile since cutting short his visit to Mauritania the night of March 21-22 and returning to Banjul. We are not aware of any public appearances by him following his return; he himself has issued no statements about a coup attempt, evidently

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relying on the GOTG's March 22 press release containing assurances that all is under control (ref a). A well-informed source told us that Jammeh was spending considerable time conducting a post-mortem on the thwarted coup plot with the newly appointed CHOD, Col Lang Tamba, and acting National Intelligence Agency (NIA) Director General Harry Sambou.

OPPOSITION'S NON-REACTION

16. (SBU) The political opposition here has yet to react publicly to this episode; normally opposition-leaning journals have confined themselves to publishing the GOTG's press release. We gather that opposition elements abroad are among those alleging fabrication of a coup attempt by a GOTG leadership seeking grounds to remove adversaries from government ranks.

STATUS OF DETAINEES

17. (SBU) As for the detained former NIA Director General Daba Marena, we have picked up reports that he and his deputy, Kemo Balajo, are likely to be released from custody soon for lack of evidence of their involvement in coup plotting. There are also reports that the former Mayor of the Banjul suburb of Kanifing and one-time close political ally of Jammeh, Abdoulie Conteh, has been taken into custody on suspicion of support for the reported overthrow attempt. By our reckoning, his detention would bring to ten the number of persons (most of them military officers) known to be in custody for suspected involvement in the anti-Jammeh plotting (ref a contains list of detainees).

COMMENT

18. (C) We continue to believe that there was indeed plotting to overthrow Jammeh, notwithstanding ongoing speculation that the GOTG leadership fabricated the incident. Of course, it is possible that planning for a coup attempt was not as advanced -- or the threat so imminent -- as the GOTG has claimed. In any event, at this point, we do not regard the incident, whatever the precise circumstances, as jeopardizing the country's stability -- or the upcoming political calendar, including the GOTG's hosting of the AU Summit or the October 2006 Presidential elections. END COMMENT.
STAFFORD